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ABSTRACT

Accountability is an old idea that has to do with responsibility for which there are consequences. When dealing with accountability, teachers should not be held solely accountable for results. In fact, the teacher is probably the unit that ought to be addressed last. The primary unit of an accountability program is the school and the school district. The accountability movement began in the United States Office of Education in 1969. It grew out of the concern of the American people for the improvement of education for the poor and disadvantaged and those people not properly served by the school system. In less than three years, accountability became one of the fastest- spreading movements in the history of American education. Accountability is a system concept. It adds to the notion of system the responsibility of achieving results. Accountability is neither a simple concept nor does it require uniformity of standards. It does, however, require clear objectives or clear descriptions of experiences. What teachers can be held accountable for may be compared to what doctors can be held accountable for--striving unceasingly to use what is known to work and using it in ways that are well-managed. (RC)

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CAP Commentary

COOPERATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT
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From time to time, the Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP) will issue *CAP Commentary* as a means of sharing various points of view on educational accountability. By abstracting and quoting the opinions of concerned individuals, ready reference may be provided to the expanding interpretation and implementation of the accountability concept.

THE TEACHER IS NOT SOLELY ACCOUNTABLE – SYSTEM ACCOUNTABILITY

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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by

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(The following is excerpted from a speech delivered by Dr. Lessinger February 7, 1975, at the REACT conference sponsored by the Cooperative Accountability Project in Denver, Colorado.)

. . .I have a feeling that anyone who discusses accountability, which has all the aura of both the Old and New Testaments, probably is well-advised to temper their remarks with the warmth of human compassion. I find recently that I like to talk about accountability and humanism. I have a notion that we have taken this concept too seriously, and we have forgotten about the human condition. . .and I'd like to think of accountability as somehow being able to nurture the human spirit. . .

I think we are all aware of the fact that few people want to argue against accountability as a principle, and they accept accountability - especially for others. I'm reminded that we really are perfectionists. . . You know. . .we expect the dentist to fix *the* tooth, and he can argue that he gets at the problem 95% of the time, but he's not perfect. We expect our secretary to get every word spelled correctly. . .we go to the supermarket and routinely expect to get our money back if the product is spoiled. . . We have very high expectations, and I don't think it's fair to say you really can't apply that kind of logic in education. . .

Accountability is an old idea, and basically it has to do with responsibility for which there are consequences. It's a special kind of responsibility for which something will happen. I think we all are disabused now of the notion that it's a business term; it far predates business; it's actually beautifully spelled out in the Bible. Currently, what is called accountability is a responsibility for stipulated results and for reporting both the degree of our success in achieving those results and the costs that were attributed to the effort. It's a very simple notion and a very difficult notion to put into operation, given the traditions and all that we have. . .in human nature and human behavior.

I want to talk today about the fact that teachers are not solely accountable for results and, as a matter of fact, that the teacher probably is the unit that ought to be addressed last. Actually, the primary unit of an accountability program is the school and the school district, and the time frame probably is three to five years. I argue very strongly that we would be well advised to take this most powerful notion as being as basic to our society as justice and mercy. No organized society can exist without some understandir of its mutual responsibility and those things for which it must answer. We would be well advised to take such a notion and treat it tenderly and administer it to each other with great compassion. We'd also be well advised to take time and do another thing: finally

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CAP is a seven-state, three-year project initiated in April, 1972, with financing provided under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-10, Title V, Section 505, as amended). Colorado is the administering state. Cooperating states are Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

expose once and for all to each other that we need to abandon bell-shaped, normal-curve thinking. I'd like to propose. . .that we use a new symbol for education – one more American and suited to it's basic sense of our traditions – and that is a thermostat. A thermostat is an accountable and humanistic device. It's known in engineering as a servo mechanism. The thermostat doesn't blame anybody. It doesn't want to know my background or the fact that I just ate whatever I just had. It doesn't want to know my IQ. . .All it does: if the temperature exceeds a certain point, something happens, and the temperature is lowered. What a magnificent notion for education – that somehow things happen; that somehow we have developed an infrastructure of caring. . .

Let's find out what's going on for the purpose of feedback and re-design. . . We can do great things if we can agree together that we want to find out what's going on for the purpose of getting where we are to go. Without that notion, accountability never will be accepted. It will be sabotaged, which it is; it will be struck against, which it is; and we shall have the unlovely notion of a great profession of education flying in the face of common sense 'cause there ain't no way you can strike against accountability! Everybody knows what it is. They don't need to go to a conference. Anybody who reads his Bible knows what it is. It has to do with responsibility *for* something *to* someone for which there are consequences and for which there are desirable methods, and so out of accountability comes the notion of good practice. . .

As a movement (accountability) has been dedicated to a specific philosophy judging education on the results it achieves. And I think it brings into education what I call the "zero reject philosophy": the notion that every kid can be a winner in something. I think it has that flavor. The movement began in the United States Office of Education in 1969. . . .It is important to remember that the movement grew out of the concern of the American people for the improvement of education for the poor and disadvantaged and those (individuals) not properly served by the school system. I think we ought never to forget that, and if I have any credibility as an expert, it is because. . .I was there at the birth of this movement. It was born not out of business and not out of a desire to save money and not out of a desire to have efficiency or effectiveness, but it grew out of a concern for the bilingual act and the dropout prevention act. And that's a matter of record. . . Let me read that testimony. . .because. . .it's gotten fogged and moved (around), and we talk about and read about all the things it *allegedly* is. I quote:

> The programs of dropout prevention and bilingual education are employing several management tools which should improve results for federal dollars invested in these programs. Also, these tools have ramifications for all federal dollars spent on education. Among the tools are accountability, technical assistance, and independent educational accomplishment audits. . .
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> Basically, accountability means that the grantee will be held responsible at any time during the project for accomplishing the objectives of the project which the grantee himself proposed, not which we proposed in Washington, but which the grantee proposed, and accountability for what you propose. . .

In less than three years, accountability became one of the fastest-spreading movements in the history of American education. . . Let me give you what I think is the best definition of accountability, and it comes out of, I think, that basic concern for the disadvantaged and the poor and the child whose parents cannot speak the English language, and so on.

This is a true story. I hope it doesn't offend anybody because it has a bit of vulgarity, but it's true, and it points out, I think, the intensity with which this movement (of accountability) has appealed to some people. I received a telephone call from then-Commissioner (of Education), Jim Allen. . . He said, "Leon, I have a meeting with some mothers from New York City's Harlem, and Secretary Finch has just called, and I've got to go. Would you please take (over the meeting) for me? . . .I found myself with 20 black women, each armed with a small rolling pin upon which was lettered, "Mothers for Quality Education." . . .They had come all the way from New York at their own expense. They didn't have a lot of money, and they explained what they thought was wrong with the New York school system with respect to its treatment of their children. And the more they got into details, the more I responded in typical bureaucratic language. . . I said, "Ladies, there isn't anything that I can do or the Commissioner can do. We are prohibited by law from being involved in the instructional matters in the school system." They didn't want to hear that. Why should they? They were interested in their children, which is the proper thing. They didn't care about what I had to say. And it seemed to me they were getting more and more menacing. And being basically a coward, I resorted to Plan No. 38. I talked about all the innovations we were doing, and I happened to mention accountability. And after explaining it to them, the spokesperson came up with her rolling pin – came very close to me, happily to make emphasis and not to use it another way – and she said, "I know what accountability is. . . If you don't learn my kid, I'm going to fire your ass!"

. . .Let me move from that point and talk about the theory of accountability. Accountability is a system concept. We all know the word "system." Let me reinforce that knowledge. That is a powerful notion. . . I'm not bleak about the future, but I am aware that we will not have a future if we don't become system-thinkers. That's not a fad; it's not a plot; it's a reality. . .

A system is a group of components which has been integrated or coordinated to accomplish a purpose. It's a very general notion. It can apply to the human body's digestive or circulative system, the government system, the transportation system. There are three main ideas that appeal to us. First, the idea of purpose; second, the idea of coordination; and third, the idea of interdependence. All of which are system notions. Accountability adds to that system notion one basic idea, perhaps the most important idea you could possibly imagine in an age of interdependence, and that is the notion of system responsibility for achieving results. Not passivity, not a normal curve at the beginning and a normal curve at the end. The idea is to upset the curve.

Let's take a closer look at educational systems. An educational system like a school, school district, or college, is composed of many subsystems. Each subsystem is a group of components which has been integrated to accomplish a purpose. . . The primary subsystem, of course, is the instructional system. We can define that system as an integrated set of media, equipment, methods, and personnel efficiently and effectively performing the functions required to accomplish one or more objectives. . . .It involves people – teachers, students, principals – media, equipment, methods, space, time, all working together in some way to achieve purposes, objectives, outcomes. Accountability adds the requirement I have indicated of responsibility for achieving results. This injects a remarkable change in attitude for the process of instruction, one I think we need so terribly. . . That is, if the students do not learn, if the instructional system does not attain the objectives set for it, the system is reworked and redesigned until it does. That may mean looking at the methods, the training, the materials, the support; the object is to get where you want to go. It is not primarily to inspect, it is not to degrade, it is not to evaluate, it is to get you where you want to go. Blaming, berating, punishing are not central to accountability – in fact, they can destroy it. Knowing and taking action to be successful *is* . The instructional system's job is to achieve specified learning, and if it does not meet expectations, it is changed and rechecked until it does.

. . .At this point in time, I beg the issue about results. What kind of results are we talking about? Can we in fact verify results? Can we measure things? Let's go into that. I want you to follow the logic carefully, because if my logic is wrong, then my conclusions obviously are fallacious. I'll not hide anything. First, I think we can agree, as an axiom, that the purpose of education has to do with learning and not teaching. Teaching is a way, a fine way, to achieve learning. Learning is the purpose and not teaching. . . Now if the purpose of education is learning, we run into a problem. We don't know much about learning. All we know is it's a change in behavior, but we don't know what it is. We know it's as natural as breathing and that people learn all the time. . . We know that learning proceeds out of experience. Does it not follow, then, that the business of the schools is the supply and orchestration of experience? . . .And so we send our children to school because they can have experiences out of which, hopefully, they can learn what they need to know. What kinds of experiences do we know how to supply?? Let me suggest three: training experience . . .educative experience. . .celebrative experience.

. . .We know that in (the) training (experience), if we can observe the behavior that is required in the setting where it is used, we can train with targets set at ninety percent of the trainees (to) achieve 90% of the objectives. All that is required (and it's a big "all") is that we can know the behavior that is required, the setting where it's required, and therefore can express those behaviors. . . as a terminal performance objective. . .If you can write a TPO, a terminal performance objective, which consists of the behavior of the student, the conditions which will elicit it, and the standards for judging it, you have created the basis for this educational "miracle."

What about educative experiences? Aren't there more things than behavioral objectives involved here? What about the things of the spirit, what about insights, understandings, appreciation, the affective domain, what about it? You can't write behavioral objectives for that. Ah, then, there's the fatal flaw of accountability. Doesn't that mean that accountability, of necessity, will be restricted to the training experience? I think not. I hope not. . . It seems to be going in that direction, and I think that's our fault as educators. Instead of fighting it, we need to work it for us. There's nobody from on high saying to us what accountability is. There's no group of Mafia sitting somewhere deciding what it is. Here is an idea, waiting, for the profession to deal with. Not with a picket sign. Not with distortion. . .but with a kind of rare courage that (the profession) needs to display now. . .

The question, then, is, "In what sense can we be accountable for the educative experience?" Well, I think the educative experience is measurable in terms of the situation itself. I don't think we can guarantee outcomes, we have to have faith. . . .Are we that poverty minded as to use a notion like accountability to make trivial objectives because "we can't measure?" Don't people realize that measurement is both nominal, ordinal, as well as interval? It's all measurement. . .

I think it should be obvious that accountability is not a simple concept. It does not require uniformity of standards. It does require clear objectives or clear descriptions of experiences. It does not specify objectives, but objectives must be specified. The best ways for deriving objectives are through needs assessments, cooperative inquiry, and cooperative development. It does not demand assembly-line learning sequences; if the objectives or experiences are specified, it generally will be found that there are alternative processes for achieving the objectives. It does not emphasize minimum performance at low cost. It does emphasize discovering how well the objectives were met, what the cost was to achieve them, and what effective and efficient ways there are to close the gap between what is and what was intended. It does not hold individual teachers totally responsible.

Let me deal with that. For me, the appropriate model is the model of the medical doctor. I realize there are problems with this model. Nonetheless I find it wrong to say that a teacher is accountable for a student's learning. . . What the teacher can be held accountable for is what the doctor can be held accountable for: knowing and using good practice. . .If there are ten ways for achieving reading and we choose to use our own way, why? Because we feel like it? That's not accountability, that's sloppiness. . .There will be many ways, hopefully, to fit individual desires, personality styles, but there will be ways based on research by which we know what good practice is. That's professional accountability – knowing and using good practice -- striving unceasingly to use what we know works and to use it in ways that are well-managed. . .

Finally, let me talk about the celebrative experience. It may sound odd to you that I, who am supposed to be influential in accountability, would end a talk to you with a mystical notion of celebration. . .As a matter of fact, you can measure the celebrative experience. . . Recall the football season when, at times, grown men jump up and down and hug each other. . . You can see it in sports; you can see it in music; you can see it in drama: there's an overwhelming feeling of thanksgiving and joy. Sometimes people fall to their knees and thank God; there's an emotional fervor to the celebrative experience. Maslow called it a kind of peak experience. William James called it a mystic experience; Freud called it an oceanic experience. We all know what it is because we've had it, I hope. You know when it arises? Whenever you take risks and overcome odds. Without risk, without competition, without challenge, you cannot get a celebrative experience. Without striving for the ideal, the excellent, you can't get a celebrative experience. . . Interesting, the word "celebration." Can we visualize school in part as a celebrative experience? Do we give our young people an opportunity to be successful, to overcome odds? What kind of accountability is that? What kind of responsibility? What kind of approach? What kind of attitude would let us design a school system for our own children that would have them in training experiences, educative experiences, even celebrative experiences? What a vision. Impractical? Is it?

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